

Ensuring continuity in Auroville's commercial units

Ranging in activity from restaurants to consulting, fashion, construction and more, Auroville has over 250 commercial units. Many of them have developed a reputation for excellence that extends beyond the community, often becoming a first introduction to Auroville for those far away. The exceptional personalities that the Auroville philosophy attracts have added to the diversity and drive of these units, but as the years pass and the population changes, the importance of fostering solid teams and making long-term plans has become increasingly apparent.

What does it take to build up a business, bring together a strong managerial team, and plan toward continuity well into the future – all within the unique Auroville context? Executives from three major commercial units share their experiences.

Tanto Trattoria Pizzeria

Twelve years ago, Daniel started Tanto Trattoria Pizzeria, an Italian restaurant that specializes in pizza and other Italian specialties, in what was formerly called New Creation Corner Restaurant. The pizzeria has had great success over the years, providing a setting for gourmet meals for Aurovilians and attracting crowds of visitors with its authentic Italian food. Today Tanto has been able to expand beyond the original restaurant to three additional locations – on East Coast Road, in Pondicherry, and in the Sri Ma beach community – and has diversified to include a guesthouse and community laundry services.

Seventy people are now working with Tanto, many of whom are disadvantaged women from the neighbouring villages. Work positions have good scope for advancement and those who begin by washing dishes often go on to become servers and cooks. While the training at Tanto has enabled many cooks to go on to work elsewhere, it has also created a loyal team, of which some have been inspired to join Auroville. There are 12 Aurovilians and two newcomers in the Tanto team today. Management of each location is divided between Daniel, Sheril (the second executive of Tanto

alongside Daniel), and two other Aurovilians.

After Tanto's third executive, Paulo, passed away a year ago, Daniel and Sheril have struggled to find someone who could join them in the role of executive and work with the same spirit.

"Here in Auroville, we lack people who want to work for something, and not just for themselves," says Daniel, who remains reserved as to whether they can find someone who would complement their philosophy and feels that there needs to be a shift in mentality.

Coming from a family with a history of being highly successful in both business entrepreneurship and scientific fields, Daniel has dedicated his own talent to meeting the needs of Auroville and Aurovilians in an income-generating manner. He strongly believes that money is a force: the more he gives, the more he receives.

This generosity and business farsightedness have borne fruit, and Tanto is consistently one of the highest contributors to Auroville City Services, giving beyond the requisite 33% of business profits. However, they are also careful to reinvest some of their profits into their own business development so that the unit can continue to grow into the future.

Sunlit Future

Sunlit Future has also developed under the leadership of a small team of Aurovilians into a nationally known establishment that has become a leading force in the effort to offer solar energy technologies tailored for both India's urban and rural populations. Started in 2010 by Rishi, Divya, and Joerg, the company has expanded to about 25 people. Currently, the team includes three Aurovilians, and among their alumni are Debu and Om, who have joined or started other endeavours in Auroville. Most of the team members are young men from the villages surrounding Auroville who have a background in science or engineering and a readiness to learn. They receive apprenticeship-style training at Sunlit Future's solar installations on how to handle the specialized machinery and then continue to develop their careers there. Sunlit Future also gets two or three German Weltwaerts volunteers every year. Despite being located far from the typical urban hubs where ambitious individuals in this sector tend to work, Sunlit Future does get a few highly qualified individuals who come for short-term projects and bring vital skills to the unit.

"The main impediment to growing any

Auroville business is not the financing but the human resources," Divya explains.

But she observes that Sunlit Future has managed to develop a stable structure and even a middle management team made up of employees who have worked there since its inception.

One of the key factors in this was receiving guidance from Sheba, an Aurovillian who facilitates team building and leadership development. Sheba brought the latest human resources techniques, and conducted interviews and evaluations that allowed the team members to identify and valorise their individual qualities. Sunlit Future has proposed a long-term agreement for continued consultancy from Sheba.

Divya recognizes how important it is to build up the technical, social, communication, and client-interaction skills of the Sunlit Future team, particularly because so many of their employees have grown up in a rural setting where they were not exposed to the important nuances of email, reporting, and documentation. These have had to be honed for the day-to-day functioning of the unit.

Pondering over why no Auroville unit has become a medium-sized enterprise (as per the Indian classification scheme) and surpassed the Rs. 50 crores turnover mark, Divya's theory is that it comes down to three factors: firstly, most Aurovilians have not come here with grandiose commercial ambitions; secondly, there is a shortage of appropriately qualified people to push a project forward; and thirdly, the Auroville infrastructure is not fully conducive to the development of an ecosystem in which commercial units can grow.

Even though Sunlit Future is riding on the wave of the ever-increasing demand for solar technology, they are not able to do this as easily as mainstream commercial companies in larger India. However, despite these systemic roadblocks and lack of human resources, Sunlit Future is able to succeed, particularly because it is not a capital-intensive business. And ultimately, the Auroville identity is often a cachet for potential clients because it indicates a different business ethic and high quality of product. "This is a very important intangible asset that we have as businesses in Auroville and we must keep that high benchmark," says Divya.

Miniature

In the textile and fashion category, Miniature is a well-known Auroville enterprise that has built up an international reputation for design and quality.

Liliana started the unit in 1997, working from her house in Shamga with two machines and two tailors because she could not find a workshop space. She had worked from the age of 20 in this field, both in Italy and abroad, and had already worked as a designer for Auromode, but she wanted to put her energy into helping Auroville grow. When a friend in Italy asked her to design silk pants, she began her own production unit. With a strong background in design and an innate knack for choosing fabrics and colours, Liliana was capable of single-handedly doing all the tasks she asked her employees to perform, which attracted workers and inspired excellence.

Out of the 47 Miniature team members today, 37 are women. When building her team, Liliana wanted to employ women because she deeply sympathized with the plight of women in the villages, although she has had to compromise and hire men in order to get the needed experience of operating the sewing machines. Those who join are trained in the unit itself and employee retention is good, with one of the first two employees still work-

ing with Miniature to this day. Liliana tries to consistently empower her female employees by helping to support their children's education through school uniforms and books or celebrating International Women's Day with zeal.

However, despite the workers being loyal employees, none of them have expressed the wish to become Aurovillian and Liliana has struggled to find young people within the Auroville community who are interested and able to contribute to the commercial unit. She recalls one person who had offered to join but who could only come twice a week. "Here, you have to know the job and you have to work," explains Liliana, who is regularly at work beyond the timings of her employees, especially when traveling for materials. But as she approaches her 77th birthday, Liliana is also realistic about her succession plans. "What would we do if there was not somebody who knows how to oversee and guide the work at Miniature?" However, Liliana feels confident that the diverse client base that they have developed and the competent production team can continue on into the future.

Luckily, Liliana has been joined in more recent years by dedicated managerial team members. Ambra joined Miniature seven years back when she returned to Auroville. She has become a key member in overseeing the daily work. Kumar has been in Auroville for 25 years and with Miniature for 12 years. He primarily oversees accounts and administrative tasks, and provides a vital link to the team members. "What I appreciate is the freedom I have in Miniature to take decisions," he says. And this autonomy has allowed this managerial team to grow and solidify.

What is there to learn?

Business continuity in the outside world can involve very high stakes – there may be shareholders, highly paid executives, or thousands of employees within a complex organisational structure. But Auroville cannot be viewed through this same lens. Economic attainment is important to Auroville's growth and the livelihoods of all those who work within Auroville, but comparatively more weight is given to the individual journey of working rather than the financial effects. There is a more holistic approach to commerce here, in line with the Auroville ethos, and it seems that its commercial units are doing their best to deal with all the attendant successes and challenges.

Hilary

PHOTO COURTESY TANTO

PHOTO COURTESY SUNLIT FUTURE

PHOTO COURTESY MINIATURE

Top left: The Tanto Trattoria Pizzeria team. Daniel is in the middle. Top right: The team of Miniature. Liliana is garlanded. Bottom: The team of Sunlit Future. Rishi stands in the back row, 10th from right.

Supporting new commercial units

Recently, Margarita of the Auroville Board of Commerce and Torkil of the Integral Entrepreneurship Lab have developed a toolkit for those seeking to start a new commercial unit in Auroville. It guides entrepreneurs through the steps of evaluating the opportunities in Auroville, developing their business plan, and registering their unit or activity. This is particularly important as Auroville has a unique structure that does not mirror mainstream businesses, largely due to the fact that all assets and businesses in Auroville are communally owned and economic activity is performed for the communal benefit rather than for personal gain.

As striking out on a new project has become far more formalised in recent years and can appear opaque to those not already involved in a managerial capacity in an Auroville unit, this toolkit will be an essential tool in stimulating economic and commercial self-sufficiency.

• Jearaj and Ganesh

• Savithri

• Update from the A4A campaign

pages 2-3

• Youth Housing: Kriya and Anitya

• The FAMC interacts with the community

pages 4-6

• Population statistics

• Matrimandir calendar and planner

page 7

• The Northern Wildlife Corridor

• Citizens' Assemblies

page 8

Helping others to travel the world

Jearaj and Ganesh have worked at Inside India, Auroville's travel agency, for the last six years. They both hail from semi-urban educated backgrounds, and consciously chose to shift from city jobs to working in Auroville. "Here it's peaceful, there's harmony, and not too much pushing," says Jearaj. Ganesh cites Auroville's innovation, team work, and the opportunity to learn "many things" as part of the appeal of working here.

Before he applied for the job in Auroville, Jearaj worked "24x7" in a Chennai travel agency that serviced the corporate sector. "There was no rest day," he recounts of the job he did for seven years, in which he was expected to respond to client's requests on Sundays. "There was really a lot of stress." While holding down the Chennai job, Jearaj would travel back to his family home in Pondicherry every weekend, often reaching home at 2 am Sunday morning. "That was horrible for my family. It was difficult to go and come back. When I saw the vacancy in Auroville, I thought it would be a good opportunity. So I shifted here."

Ganesh was working at an Auroville e-commerce company, selling precious stones online. The job soon became boring. "I was only communicating with people through the computer, and there was no human communication." He shifted to a job in a Pondicherry travel agency, and then heard about the vacancy at Inside India. "I'm very happy to work here because people want to go all over the world, and we have to find a solution according to their needs. And the interaction is good here."

When Ganesh and Jearaj commenced working at Inside India, Auroville was not entirely new to them, as they'd both grown up in the bioregion. Jearaj grew up near Pondicherry and worked briefly as a tour guide for the Pondicherry Tourism Board, after completing his college studies in travel management. One of his tasks was to bring tourist groups to Auroville. "I didn't have to explain much, because everything was explained at the Visitors Centre. We would tell them to sit and watch the video. Auroville made my job easy!"

Ganesh grew up in a village about 25 km from Pondicherry, and came into contact with Auroville after completing high school, through an uncle who lived near Koot Road and who often spoke of Auroville. On his first visit, Ganesh was "surprised" to see the evening school at Ilaigarkal Education Centre. "This kind of school system was not there in my village. I admired the idea that you could learn something after work." Ganesh started attending the evening classes, and continued to be involved with the centre as he undertook his biochemistry degree



Jearaj and Ganesh

in Pondicherry.

After graduation, Ganesh decided not to pursue a career in biochemistry. There were no job prospects for biochemists in Pondicherry, and he did not want to go to Bangalore or Hyderabad for work. "We [Tamil people] don't like to go away from our hometown. I want to work around here." So Ganesh started an administrative job at Ilaigarkal Education Centre, which included doing graphics work in the publishing section. After a couple of years, he took a job in Vijay's e-commerce jewellery business at Fertile Windmill, where he stayed for six years before shifting to the Pondicherry travel industry job. Throughout those years, he voluntarily taught computers to Aurovilian seniors in Kolam computer training centre, New Creation and to children at various Auroville outreach projects, such as Aikiyam school and Arulvazhi Education Centre in Morattandi village. He emphasises the value of having worked in many different environments over the years, and having "learned many things".

Both Ganesh and Jearaj juggle daily family responsibilities, dropping their children at school and their wives at work, before commuting 20 minutes to reach Auroville by 10 am. "I hate the city," confesses Ganesh, pointing out that he is compelled to live in Pondicherry because his wife has a nursing tutor job there. Jearaj commutes from Vanur, about 10 kilometres from Auroville, and drops his wife at Auroville Consulting, where she works in human resources. Their families appreciate the convenience of working in Auroville. "Here, we finish on time, and go home," says Ganesh. "So I'm happy to work here."

And what are the major differences they see between Auroville and 'outside'?

Ganesh points out that when he first visited Auroville straight after high school, he was intrigued that the local women did jobs he had never seen them doing before. In his own village, women did agricultural work, and returned directly home after work. "When I came here, I saw all the village women coming to work in Auroville houses, and on the way home, they collected firewood. It was interesting to see they are independent here. They work and earn money, and do not depend on the men. I like that very much."

Ganesh narrates with amusement his early impressions of the projects and courses run by people in Auroville, such as learning to draw kolam designs. "One foreigner did a 'How to wear saree' project. I thought, 'This is crazy! Why are they doing this as a project? This is so simple!'" Then only I realised that there are so many things in our culture that we can see as a subject! I came to know that this is valued. One man from Japan had an old black and white camera and was taking photos of windows all over the country. He said it's a project documenting windows! I thought, 'They're also doing windows!'"

Jearaj points to waste management as a significant difference between "clean" Auroville and his home place, which is an outer region of Pondicherry, where "a lot of people are throwing garbage outside". While Jearaj and his neighbours have extracted a promise from the district collector for better sanitary measures, he emphasises the root of the problem: "People are not taking responsibility for themselves and do not have good awareness. It's really affecting our social and cultural universe, and creating health issues."

Ganesh points out that while villagers expect the panchayat and government "to do all these things", he notes that in Auroville groups of people join together to complete projects such as waste management or social enterprises that repurpose waste into items that can be sold. "Village people come and learn these things, and then apply it in their own village and make a business."

Jearaj emphasises that outside workplaces have "too much pushing", which contrasts with the "peace and harmony" in Auroville. His former position in a Chennai travel agency involved many cancellations and last-minute changes, and the speed at which the staff were expected to work created too much scope to make mistakes. "There, the stress levels were a lot!", he recounts. "Here, not at all! Here, mostly we do advance bookings. There is time to recheck, and time to analyse. In Chennai, if there's a mistake, they scold us. Here, they don't

scold; they say, 'Try to be aware next time'. They give us the time to analyse what happened."

Jearaj and Ganesh agree on the three main challenges of their job. The first is the occasional difficulty when airlines change their flight schedules at the last minute. Clients may not receive the message, especially if they are tourists who are coming from abroad and are hard to contact. "People might miss their flight," says Jearaj, "and they might quarrel with the check-in counter. We try to keep them informed of changes."

The second challenge is clients' expectations that a travel agency should offer a better deal than internet flight prices. "They come and argue with us," says Ganesh, "saying, 'Why don't you give me that price?'" But they see only the search page, and we show that when they click through to the payment page, extra fees are added." Jearaj points out that some airlines do not always give sufficient incentives for agents to match the price.

Ganesh cites a third main difficulty: when people buy tickets elsewhere using a credit card and then want to change the flight but cannot get through to the airline's customer service. "It can be difficult. We're ready to help them. Only then they realise the benefits of our service!"

Both of them see themselves working at Inside India for the long term. "I want to continue the same way in the future," says Jearaj. "It's going well with the company and I can develop here."

Jearaj says the high point of each year for him is the Sangaman – the annual event that brings 8000 people from the bioregion to celebrate with Aurovilians and visitors: "It was really nice to meet people and feel good." Ganesh cites the visit of late former President Abdul Kalam to Auroville as a "big moment", even though he could only see him at a distance. He points out that Kalam's "inspiring" life journey has some parallels with his own. "He started from the small village. He always said positive things, how to overcome struggles. He is gone, but his words will remain. I was very happy [to see him]. He is an inspiration to me."

While they each have participated in some Auroville seminars and visited Matrimandir, Ganesh points out that it's not a simple matter for employees to arrange time for meditation in the inner chamber, which he has tried to do. Following their request for staff yoga classes, their workplace has arranged for a yoga teacher to hold classes in the office two evenings a week. As I was leaving their office following the interviews, Ganesh and Jearaj were rolling out their mats in preparation. "We feel yoga is good for us," says Ganesh, "so we're very happy they organised it and that we can learn. I get some remedies for my back pain. And it makes us feel more relaxed."

Lesley

Pursuing dance and unending education

Savithiri was born and raised in the neighbouring village of Edaiyanchavadi. Growing up, her life entwined her two passions: the Indian classical dance form Bharat Natyam; and the Auroville village outreach project Thamarai.

Savithiri began studying Bharat Natyam at the age of six in her primary school, but when she shifted to high school, dance was not offered there. So she approached Thamarai coordinator Bridget, who arranged ongoing dance classes for Savithiri and other girls at Thamarai. "I love to perform in Bharat Nivas," says Savithiri animatedly. "That's my passion, my hobby, my love, everything."

At that time, Thamarai was located in a large old house in Edaiyanchavadi, and Savithiri participated in all the after-school activities, learning "unique things" such as karate, dance, music and drama, that made her "different" from other girls in her school. "This was a gift to make me multi-talented and to help my confidence, so I see my life as something different. I want to be independent, to do what I want to do. My family gives me freedom to explore my life."

Savithiri was attending a Tamil-medium government school during the day, and she points out how Thamarai offered her the chance to improve her "poor" English. "Earlier, if someone asked a question in English, I was afraid. So, when I started at Thamarai, I practised every day by asking the facilitator for some materials. Day by day, I learnt better English. This also gave me confidence."

When she graduated from high school with good marks, Savithiri wanted to pursue dancing as a profession, but she eventually chose

engineering. "I had the opportunity to become a professional dancer, but in our society dance is not welcomed as a profession. I stopped dancing when I joined college, because it was fixed in my mind that I could only do one thing at a time. But I discovered later it was not true! After finishing college, I joined an Auroville dance group."

Savithiri began work in an Auroville construction company after graduation, but after seven months she decided she had had enough. "I did not feel happy. I wanted to dance." By this time, Thamarai had established an after-school centre in Annai Nagar village, on the northern side of Auroville, and Savithiri was invited to join the team as a facilitator. "I enjoy seeing each child in Thamarai getting a taste of the possibilities, and it takes me back to my childhood. So I choose to do this."

Savithiri's job involves facilitating the different activities in Thamarai, including homework support. She talks animatedly of her love for maths, and how she tries to teach it to the Thamarai students in a fresh way. "In my childhood, I learnt that if I mug up, I can pass the exams. But learning maths that way is not going to help me in my life, unless I understand how to use the concept. So, I like to ask the children about each thing they're learning: 'How can you use it in your daily life?' I would like to see each child be independent in future, and to understand how they can apply their studies to life in a practical way."

Leadership trainer Monica Sharma's workshops in recent years have also been a significant influential factor in Savithiri's life, especially for learning problem-solving."



Savithiri

For example, I can't change my mum's mind, but I can change myself. So rather than thinking, 'Oh, I can't change it,' I can see it as a problem I can solve. That gave me a broader vision."

Savithiri also cites learning meditation as a difficult and "big" thing in her life. "I learnt how to be still for a few minutes without making a background conversation, and to see my body and to give some time to my space... I can do five minutes now, but before I couldn't do it at all!"

Savithiri talks of Auroville as a place that provides "space and support" where she can pursue her goals and career "peacefully". "My job in Thamarai does not feel like a 9-5 job," she explains. "I can tell Bridget the things I don't want to do in my job, and I can renegotiate with her, which I can't do in an outside job. The culture is like that."

She points to the way in which talk of

marriage looms for village girls from around the age of 20 onwards (she is 24 now), but she has different ideas. "I have the confidence to speak to my family powerfully, and to say: 'I want to achieve something before marriage.'" Savithiri points to the need to give children the freedom to follow their passions, while also cultivating a responsible attitude. "If my mum had given me permission to continue dance, maybe I would have achieved more by now. Because of society, I could not achieve that. I would want my own child to understand their own wishes and talent, and to encourage them to explore that."

But she also acknowledges, that – relative to many young women in her village – she has had a certain amount of freedom, due to being the youngest daughter in the family. "I feel my elder sister sacrificed her life to give me an opportunity. I learned everything from her. She learned dance, but now she is married and she has to cook all day on Sunday, while I spend the day at dance classes and other activities. She could not spend as much time studying for her bachelor degree, because she had to do all the housework. I learned from her how to face problems, but I got more space than her to try out things. If there are two children, they should have an equal chance."

Savithiri concludes that while her work makes her happy – "the students are the future" – her "biggest challenge" lies in the village. "They have a mindset that people can learn only from elders. But I also learn from children. However, it's a challenge to explain that in the village where I'm living."

Lesley

Update from the Acres for Auroville campaign

The A4A team reports on the results of supporters' solidarity

On August 15th, the Acres for Auroville Land Campaign kicked off its sixth year as a collaborative action of Lands for Auroville Unified (LFAU) with the worldwide centres of Auroville International. Guided by The Mother's words – "A harmonious collective aspiration can change the course of circumstances" – we have worked hard to create awareness of and resources for the urgent need to purchase the still missing land in Auroville's designated Master Plan area.

Approximately 1,000 donors from Auroville, the Ashram, India and all around the world have donated to support the A4A action. The majority are repeat donors – and Auroville's 50th anniversary brought particularly encouraging support! For the past five years, Unity Pavilion, in conjunction with A4A and AV Arts, has hosted the Art for Land exhibition and fundraiser whose proceeds go to A4A. Other solidarity has come from initiatives of Auroville units – Visitors Center, CSR, Upasana, Joy Community's Healing Festival, marathon market contributors, and Maroma Candles. The book *50 Poems from Auroville* was created by Vikas and funded by AVI UK to support A4A. And thanks to AuroImage, we have a rich collection of original films and clips. Yes, solidarity works and, yes, together, we can change circumstances!

And mainly, we thank the land donors! According to the Land Board, donations to Acres for Auroville and LFAU have made possible the purchase of 52 acres of previously missing land since A4A's beginning. These new plots have provided the space for vital infrastructure, afforestation, food growing and activities that contribute to Auroville's continuing leadership in ecology. Here are some of the results as reported by the land stewards on the new plots purchased thanks to our supporters' solidarity.

Auroville's farming boosted

Food sustainability is a basic need and the donations have enabled the purchase of significant acres of new farmland. Siddhartha Farm is one of the beneficiaries, as the A4A funds have enabled the purchase of extra plots for the farm. It is one of Auroville's oldest farms, started by Herbert in 1995, and located on the fertile plain near Irumbai Lake. Using experimental, organic and traditional methods, Siddhartha grows paddy rice, bananas, pulses, grams, nuts and sugar cane, and has food-processing units for making cashew butter, groundnut butter and organic jaggery (raw sugar syrup). One of Siddhartha's major goals is helping Auroville achieve self-sufficiency in its need for rice, with two harvests a year possible due to the availability of water. For the new plots, digging and laying in water pipes was the first task undertaken along with building a temporary thorny fence and creating access to the main road. Herbert writes: "I remember three years ago when we met at the farm with Sigrid and had a collective dream to integrate this land for Auroville. It feels unrealistic that this dream has come true. We invite you to have more unrealistic collective dreams for a better future!"



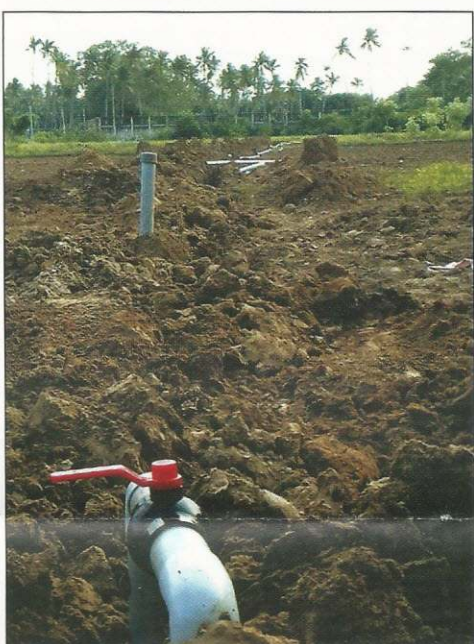
Planting tree saplings at Pitchandikulam

Another farm that has benefited from new donation-funded land is Kalpavruksha, stewarded by Ramesh. Also located in the Irumbai catchment area, the good water availability enables it to grow cereals, sesame, sugarcane and rain-fed vegetables. It aims to promote biodiversity by cultivating endangered food such as varieties of bananas and animal species, like

indigenous hens and native fish. And just this past September, Auroville's Land Board announced the happy news of more new land purchased in the Irumbai area, thanks to supporters' donations.

Tree planting on new land equals water

Many new donation-funded plots are located in the collectively managed NFA sanctuary forest (Northern Forests of Auroville) which comprises eight stewarded greenbelt blocks. In line with Auroville's tradition of green leadership, the sanctuary aims to establish a protected forest, and collectively manage it for posterity. The new plots have provided welcome new land for this goal. According to Kamataru steward Rishi, "Our climate is the result of the extent and quality of our forests. Forests are, in fact, water. The health of our aquifers is directly connected with the health of our watersheds which are directly correlated with the health and extent of the forests on them. Unless we recreate sufficient surfaces of land covered with protected forest, we will not be able to replenish the aquifers nor be able to change the climate." Additionally, the NFA is meant as a



Irrigation pipes for new land at Siddhartha Farm

diverse wildlife breeding ground and preservation area for nearly-extinct indigenous species through the creation of a closed evergreen forest canopy over as much land as possible.

Island reports that NFA stewards have planted several thousand tree saplings on the new plots, and constructed fencing to protect against the destruction of new plants by grazing animals. Also, a collectively managed evergreen nursery and seed orchard have been set up at Fertile Field to provide sufficient seedlings for the sanctuary forest. On the Fertile Field new plots, stewards Jan and Jana report that they have planted 1500 tree seedlings in the past two years since the purchase of the new land. Jana comments on one plot: "If you walk on this plot it is starting to get the feeling of a young forest. The seedlings are doing well and 80% to 90% survived the long period without rain from last December till July this year. Another plot became like a small forest ... we noticed many deer tracks on the land, so we leave the land as a sanctuary and it is also a nice wild corridor to Baraka our neighbour." Two other new plots in Fertile Field were previously cashew fields that are now being repurposed, as Jana notes: "We planted about 500 seedlings and we also see regeneration from the trees of the nearby old forest on this land. The seedlings are about one metre high now."

Pitchandikulam Forest, another recipient of donation-funded plots, is greatly respected for its work in afforestation, the re-creation of biodiversity, and its leadership in bio-regional training. It is located in the South East of the Residential Zone with its mostly low-density residential communities stretching into the greenbelt. Resident Fabian writes: "Two of the newly-acquired plots are well-connected to the already protected and fenced area and are seamlessly integrated into the work done over the last four decades. The work on another new plot – close to our windmill providing the water for the nursery – started already last year

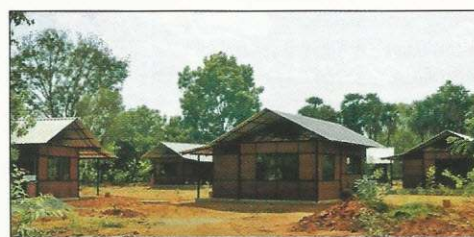


New land in Mahalakshmi Park

whereas the planting for another one only began with the rains we received in September. In both cases we carry on planting the local TDEF (Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest) as experience has shown that it is the most suitable forest type for our local context." Parts of another plot have been planted as an arboretum. The team uses the seedlings grown in the Pitchandikulam nursery. Fabian points out the difficulties they face with decreasing water levels in the wells and other challenges when living and protecting the sensitive forest: "But, of course, one equally can write about the privilege to live in such a beautiful environment, the satisfaction to be involved in the work of afforestation, and the joy of working together with and learning from the team of men and women affiliated with Pitchandikulam since many years." The new plot purchased to be absorbed into Revelation Forest Sanctuary will build upon intense work that's been done there. Steward Patrick reports: "We banded and planted it, but half of it is a ravine and so we built a dam there. This plot is the critical element in Revelation's land use, contributing to the infiltration of half a million litres of water minimum per year, achieving zero run-off loss on a 60-hectare watershed. Previously, 90% of the water was lost to evaporation."

The City area – land for consolidation and essential infrastructure

Auroville's City area is the central hub of the township, with the Matrimandir at its heart. Several new plots have been purchased with the goals of protecting the sanctity of the Matrimandir area, continuing harmonious consolidation, and creating needed infrastructure. Two of the new donations-purchased plots in the City Area are located just beyond the Matrimandir's outer gardens. One of them, stewarded by the Land Board, consolidates an important sector of Mahalakshmi Park, enabling the creation of a direct pathway to Matrimandir from the Surrender-Grace-Arka



New youth housing for the Kriya Community

area. Another plot, stewarded by Auroville's CSR (Center for Scientific Research), is dedicated to the Residential Zone's water needs, and provides an innovative solution to both sewage treatment and water conservation. The sixty cubic metre treatment plant has been operational since the beginning of this year and serves eight communities along the Vikas radial, providing treated irrigation water for 450 inhabitants. Each community is linked through a return pipe line with an irrigation outlet. Leftover treated water is stored in four tanks situated just behind Mahalakshmi Park with a capacity of 200 cubic metres. Tency reports that the treated water will be available for irrigation around Matrimandir and Center area communities, thereby "reducing the need for

pumping fresh water for irrigation purposes, thereby saving ground water resources."

Auroville has an urgent need for housing, especially for its enthusiastic younger generations who want to build their lives in the City of Dawn. Donations have provided the land on which 26 new housing units were built for Auroville's new youth community, Kriya. Its 14 single units, 6 family houses, and 6 couple units are destined for Newcomers and Aurovilians aged 20-35, who are working full-time for Auroville. Housing Service representative Ole reports that this housing is particularly welcome for second-generation Aurovilians who mostly have no financial resources outside of their Auroville maintenance stipends. As part of the Youth Habitat Programme, the housing was built by the Auroville construction group Sumark, with construction costs provided by the Government of India. The units come with full infrastructure, including an advanced wastewater recycling system. The Kriya plots also host the workshops of Sumark and of TreeCare, a unit of young Auroville arborists. The construction of two more housing units on the new land has recently been approved. One young Kriya resident wrote: "I would like to take this opportunity to express my immense gratitude for giving me a place to experience Kriya. It surely has taken off some burden from the shoulders of us young and fundless new Aurovilians who face a housing need."

The donations have also made possible a consolidating plot near the Solar Kitchen, while another plot adds to the consolidation of the International Zone area: a magical spot now being given new life by steward Rajendran, whose work includes producing medicinal plants.

We salute the work of all the stewards who are developing and protecting Auroville's Master Plan land.



Water tanks for the City Area

Horizons for the land and the continued funding need

Auroville's Land Board hopes to announce more good news soon, all made possible by donors' generosity to A4A. But the job is far from done. Still missing is 8% of the city's designated land and approximately 68% of the Greenbelt. Land Board member Renu writes: "Every year with donor's help the Land Board has worked on purchasing and consolidating lands for Auroville. We face enormous hurdles on many levels but we are committed to protecting and purchasing land for the realisation of Her dream. We thank donors for their support."

For those visitors to Auroville in early 2019, the fundraising initiative Art for Land Year 5 (January 5th – February 21st) exhibition and auction will be taking place at the Unity Pavilion.

The Acres for Auroville Team
(Aryadeep, Mandakini, Jothi, Joël),
in coordination with Auroville's Land Board

More information on Acres for Auroville can be found at A4A's website (news, info, films):

<https://land.auroville.org> and at <https://www.facebook.com/acresforauroville>, AuroImage's A4A film

page: <https://vimeo.com/channels/a4a>, and Art for Land Year 5 (January 5th – February 21st) info: artforland@auroville.org in

website: <http://artforland.in/>

For information on donations & tax deductions visit <https://land.auroville.org/a4adonations/>

For online donations visit :

<https://donations.auroville.com>



The earth bag house in the making

In the last couple of years, two new communities have been birthed for youth in Auroville: Kriya and Anitya. Each has a very different model of community, and they both embrace low-cost alternative building technologies. The community of Kriya was initiated, and is stewarded, by the Housing Service, and has room for 50 residents. Anitya, on the other hand, is a small community that was initiated by the community members themselves.

Housing Service's Sonja and Ole point out that these two projects aim to address two major challenges of Auroville: the problem of encroachment on Auroville land, as well as Auroville's need to attract more young people - a need that was identified in the 2014 retreat. The Housing Service has sought to enact this strategy, says Sonja, because "we need young people, as they are likely to start things and work energetically."

Both communities are located on plots of land that lie between Auroville's centre and Edyanchavadi village - plots that were experiencing some encroachment. Ole also points out that these two communities and their low-cost housing aim to capture some of the "human unity and community spirit" of the pioneer days, which he claims has been lost as more people in Auroville become "separated by having more of a western lifestyle".

Anitya - embracing impermanence

The seed for Anitya community was planted at an eco-village design course in Pitchandikulam Forest three years ago. Some of the participants were sparked by a dreaming session in which they expressed their desire for a sustainable community space. They continued to meet and discuss how to find alternatives to the community and housing models that were being presented them in Auroville. Serena, for example, was living at the time in the "concrete apartment block" Newcomer complex Maitreye 2, where, she points out, "you're placed into a community, rather than creating it." Over time, the group solidified into eight adults and one child with a common vision of wanting to create a community with people with shared ideals, where they could build their own houses and experiment with natural materials, and take care of some land. "We had a longing for community, and this energy to give and serve," says Serena. "We want to be like the pioneers, to work with our hands and create places and community."

For the first year, the group met three times a week to "work on" themselves and address "the

human element" of community, says Serena. "If we're supposed to have human unity, the first thing we should do is try to find shared values in each other and trust each other, and building a community is a very strong way of doing that. The pioneers had that." The team also absorbed advice from many quarters, including from a human permaculture expert, and got their meetings "down to a tee", says Serena. "We listen, share, our tasks get done, no one talks over the top of others." Then they presented their ideas to the wider community. "It took a lot of work to gain trust from the Auroville community," says Serena. "We did a lot of presentations, a lot of pitching, so people could understand what we wanted to do and how we could help Auroville. And finally we got given this land to take care of in November 2017."

When the Anitya community members brainstormed the ideals for setting up their community, they identified the concept of impermanence as a core value. "The idea is to build a community together, not just houses for each of us," says Nikethana, one of the Anitya team. "We didn't relate to the idea of being provided a house to go and stay in. We all wanted to choose the people we live with, and to come together for a vision that is larger than just a house to live in." Therefore, the members aim to not "get stuck" on the idea of being attached to one piece of land or one home.

The team's larger vision is therefore an umbrella project named Joy of Impermanence, under which Anitya and two or three future communities will sit. "It's completely an experiment," says Nikethana, as she explains that the existing Anitya community will live for five years on the Anitya land, before moving to another plot under the Joy of Impermanence umbrella. This may include moving as an entire community or dispersing into different communities, and possibly even taking their houses with them to the new sites. "Can we be stewards of the land, of a space," questions Nikethana, "and yet be able to let it go, and move somewhere else?"

Serena points out that the Joy of Impermanence project aims to fulfill the Auroville charter's statement that "Auroville belongs to no one in particular", and she says the Anitya community is "really trying to live that." She positions the community as "caretakers" of the land, who are bringing infrastructure into Auroville, enjoying using sustainable materials and having the freedom to self-build. "I learnt so much building this community," she says, "and I have more respect

for it. If something goes wrong, I can fix it. Whereas, in other communities, people take the building for granted because it's given to them. In Kriya [when Serena is staying temporarily], if something goes wrong, I call Housing. There's a sense of disconnection in that."

The plot given to Anitya lies near Sacred Groves (not far from Center Guest House), and was commonly used by villagers as a short cut to Auroville's centre, or for herding goats and cows. It was also used as a village toilet, so the Anitya team took advice from the village youth about how to sensitively establish their presence on the land. "People advised us if you instantly put up a fence, the next day you're in for trouble, because people use the land," says Nikethana. "So we put in pillars, and we waited a few months before the fence was put in. We didn't really have any issues, once the fence was put up."

The community received a Government of India (GOI) grant for infrastructure, but were a little unprepared for the amount of work involved. "It's been a godsend," says Serena, "because infrastructure is super expensive and huge work, and it has been a huge learning for me." With the help of many enthusiastic volunteers, the team dug for four months by hand to connect to the water supply from Sacred Groves and Aurodam's electricity.

The GOI grant enabled the community to build some common buildings, which incorporated different construction concepts employed by Auroville units such as Earth Institute and Bamboo Centre. "The whole idea of this community is that we try and do things ourselves, or at least be part of the building process," says Nikethana. "We're trying to be self-sufficient in how we use our resources and how we use our manpower to do things." The rammed earth community social space-cum-office was built in collaboration with Auroville's Earth Institute, and with the help of many volunteers in the heat of summer. "Earthwork is very exhausting and it was a great lesson to see what goes into these structures," observes Nikethana.

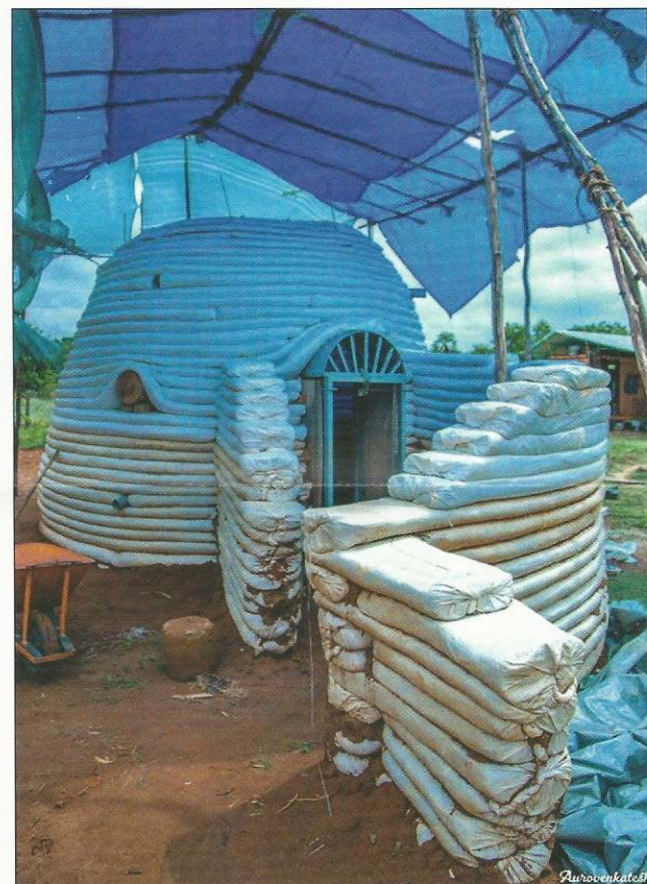
The community kitchen is a dismantlable structure that the community purchased from Evergreen community, which they took down, transported and reconstructed within one day. A "Johnny-inspired capsule", previously used as a temporary office at Kalpana, was transported intact by truck through Auroville to its new home - as a light-hearted YouTube video depicts. The community built an earth bag dome house, based on a smaller prototype they built in Kriya, which will be used as a healing space. The dry compost toilets and showers were designed with the help of architects. The plot initially felt "like a desert", so the team planted trees and vegetables as a first measure, and the community is still establishing landscaping, rainwater catchment and water retention measures.

The constructions therefore reflect the Anitya team's intentions of impermanence. Buildings can either be moved and taken with community members when they shift to another site. Or they can be demolished and "go back into the earth", says Nikethana. "A key point for us is to be as ecologically friendly as possible in how we build and use land. For us, dry compost toilets were a must, not just for the water crisis, but also for completing the cycle of using the resources as much as possible." A solar pump is used to pump water for the community, and the community - which is currently connected to the grid - intends to go fully solar when they can raise the funds.

Now that the common buildings are finished, the Anitya community members are faced with building their own homes, from their own funds, and then they can start living on the land. They have,

however, faced a few hold-ups due to personnel changes in Auroville's working groups, which has meant that their applications for their own houses have been in limbo. "It's frustrating," says Serena. "The paperwork we submitted was not passed on in the handovers. Different formats have come into place, and everything is questioned again. It's constant stop start, stop start. The GOI grant wants us living on the land by 2020." Serena and Nikethana point out how construction of the community's office, made with the Earth Institute and many volunteers, was delayed by a few months due to Auroville's slow approval process, by which time contractors and volunteers had moved on to other projects. "Then we had to build in peak summer, with fewer volunteers," says Serena. "It was hard, building from 8 am to 5 pm in the full sun in April and May. Many people got sunstroke."

Nikethana points out that - because some of Auroville's temporary dismantlable communities have, in the past, "not worked out in the way they were projected" - the Anitya team is compelled to "rebuild trust" in this approach with the Housing Service and wider community. To that end, the team has now crafted clear documents that can be given to L'Avenir each time there is a handover, "so that we don't get stopped each time," says Serena. "We don't want to be a pain and we want



Earth bag dome

this to move, so we're seeing how we can help."

While the land is slated to eventually be a high-density residential zone, Housing Service says that this is unlikely in the next two decades. In the meantime, the Anitya team is focused on the grass-roots reality on the ground, and is making efforts to be a bridge to the nearby village. A bamboo hut on the community's plot has been provided to Auroville outreach project Thamarai, for homework support for village children every evening. Anitya also employs a gardener-caretaker from the village. "He's been a saviour for us," says Serena. "He talks to everyone who comes past, so it helps to be that bridge, which has been our mission. We want it to be a two-way thing. It's been quite a journey so far!"

The Anitya crew are keen to get their own houses built because they have "itchy feet to get on the land," says Serena. "As soon as we get the green light, boom! We'll be there." In the meantime, they are all living at Kriya community, as a step in their own community-building process.

Kriya

Kriya is the first project of its kind for the Housing Service. Most large residential housing projects in Auroville consist of permanent architect-designed structures that are built by a contractor, with a community member as a project holder, where people 'contribute' in order to become a steward of their own apartment. In contrast, with Kriya, the Housing Service itself has undertaken the project holder role in building and ongoing stewardship of a community. Kriya also aims to use as much sustainable and dismantlable technology as possible, and to make housing as cheaply as possible. The Youth Housing Selection Group



The Anitya team. From left: Ion, Henrike, Nikethana, Mira, Andres, Mathilde, Serena, Michael

mmunities

chooses the youths who live in Kriya, who pay a monthly contribution which enables Housing to take care of the maintenance. While Housing Service has a similar project holder-steward arrangement with youth housing project Humanscapes in the residential zone, Kriya is different with its emphasis on simple sustainable technology and its feeling of being closer to the earth.

The Kriya community spans a 2.5 acres plot (about 10,000 square metres) located on the tar road near Edyanchavadi, and includes a plot bought through Acres for Auroville's fundraising initiatives. The residential community for 50 people also shares the land with the workshops of two Auroville units: TreeCare and Sumark, the construction unit that built Kriya in collaboration with Housing Service. "We're all former youth of Auroville," says Ole from Housing Service about the units, "and we all sat down together to figure out how to share the land, and then we went back to L'Avenir and Housing with a plan to share the infrastructure."

Like Anitya, Kriya is located on land that is projected to be a high-density housing area in future, so the Housing Service has prioritised cheap and semi-permanent housing solutions that can be easily removed after 20 or 30 years. Because the Housing Service received a Government of India (GOI) grant to build Kriya, it was necessary for them to use a "tried and tested" prototype for semi-permanent housing, says Ole. Therefore, the prototype for Kriya's single units is the Maison des Jeunes units behind Town Hall; and the model for Kriya's family homes is the dismantlable structures in Pony Farm.

With the help of Kevin and Peter from Sumark, Ole then took up the challenge of refining these models within the "very minimal budget", trying to make them "more environmentally friendly" and with a "smaller carbon footprint." The GOI grant provided Rs 50 lakh for each of three phases of building, so it was a considerable challenge to build housing for 50 people at a cost of Rs 10-20,000 per square meter, including fans, electricity, and implementation of a borewell and waste water system. Ole recounts that, according to the requirements of all GOI-funded projects that they be inspected by engineers, the project came under the purview of the Pondicherry Engineering College, whose experts were very interested in this non-standard approach to construction.

In order to construct the homes as cheaply as possible, Ole and Sumark made the infrastructure as simple as possible, for example, adapting designs in order to minimise sewage, water and electrical lines. The first phase of 14 single units - based on Louis Cohen's model in Maison des Jeunes - utilised prefabricated wall panels made of thermocol and fly ash sandwiched between cement boards. The second "more environmentally friendly" phase of units for couples are made from mud walls, based on the prototype of Sumark's workshop. "We thought, wow, this works well, let's build houses out of it," says Ole. Designed by Kevin from Sumark, these homes are made from mud and coconut fibre that is plastered onto welded mesh panels that sit tongue-in-groove

into an exposed metal frame. "This is new - to have the metal inside the mud," says Ole. "Lots of architects have come and some are starting to copy it inside Auroville."

For all homes, a false ceiling of pine wood sits under an open metal roof that enables hot air to circulate, which keeps the building cool and gives a "cottage feel," says Ole. "They're mostly mosquito and rat proof, relatively comfortable. They have a really low thermal mass, so the second the sun is gone, they cool down quickly. The residents went through a whole summer last year, and we had no complaints from them. We have more complaints from Humanscapes, which cost four times as much!"

Ole points out that the project had to keep things minimal and cut corners, "but not corners that will cost us later." For example, Ole bought the electrical materials himself in Pondicherry, in order to save costs. And while the engineering college told them they could not make glass windows within the small budget, the team at Sumark devised glass windows that slide on small wheels but do not have an aluminium frame. "It's possible with some improvisation," he asserts. "Everything is minimal."

As well as its own borewell, Kriya has a state-of-the-art waste water treatment system imported from Germany, which treats the sewage with pressurised air while using low amounts of electricity. Ole shows me the system's last chamber, by which stage the water is clear and free of smell. "You can put it in a bottle and it looks like mineral water. It meets international standards for gardening and food production." While the treated waste water is provided to each home through an outdoor tap, Ole says there has been a mixed response from the residents. "The foreigners were immediately happy to use it to grow bananas and vegetables, but the locals living here initially didn't like using waste water. It's not considered to be clean. But I think now they have seen that it's clean and they are using it."

The Kriya community now has room to house 50 people, and consists of 14 rooms for singles with a common kitchen, six two-bedroom family flats, and six couple flats. The houses are designed to last for about 25-30 years. If and when necessary, the houses can be dismantled and the walls, roof and ceiling can be re-used.

One significant difference between Kriya and most Auroville communities is that it consists of 'residents' who pay a monthly contribution to maintain the buildings. (In Kriya, singles pay Rs 1500; couples Rs 2500; families Rs 3000). While Housing Service has been criticised by some for implementing this rent-like model, Ole claims the contributions are barely enough to maintain the buildings and infrastructure. And despite the complaints, youths continue to put their names down for housing in Kriya. "More of this needs to be



Units for singles in Kriya

done," says Serena, who is living in Kriya until she can move to Anitya. "Some of the prices out there for housing are ridiculous. So this is amazing."

In contrast to Kriya, most Auroville communities consist of stewarded apartments, which Ole says, has become more like ownership in Auroville. "Stewards in Auroville feel more entitled than owners in other parts of the world. They want to have a say on who lives 200 metres on the other side of the community. Where in the world do you have that kind of say? You don't even get to choose your next door neighbour elsewhere."

Living in Kriya

Serena has been living in Kriya since it was implemented 18 months ago. "The first thing we did was plant the trees," she says. "This was nice, and connected us to the space and gave a sense of working on the land." She initially lived in a single unit, and then took a "step up in quality" to a couple's unit. "Living in a mud earth building, the energy is amazing," she says. "And we have glass on the windows. I've never been dry in Auroville when it rains! This double ceiling is really nice. So the physical structure of these couple units are fantastic. I can hardly fault it."

The challenges for Kriya residents include noise from neighbours - "That's a standard problem for Auroville" says Serena, "people drinking in the nearby field" - and the slightly inconvenient location on the "fringe" of Auroville, which necessitates taking the tar road and leaves the homes vulnerable to occasional theft.

Most Kriya members are new Aurovilians, like Serena. About half the community's population is Tamil, from the nearby village of Edaiyanchavadi. Serena points out that "there was a bit of a divide" in the beginning, and that not enough people attended community meetings and quite a few residents returned to their village homes to eat dinner. But she says that this has changed as more Tamil youths have joined the community. "Now they cook and eat together in the shared kitchen, so there's a strong bond now, they have created a community." And for the last two seasons, the Kriya community has taken charge of its own cashew harvesting, which means early morning work throughout the hot months.

Ole points out that many local youths did not originally want to live in Kriya, because they felt the houses were not "proper" enough. Some of these youths instead sought to live in the "more proper housing" complex Humanscapes. But this has now changed. Ole and Sonja claim that many youths now request to come to Kriya for the "community spirit". Sonja says that Kriya's composition of "people from everywhere" means that they "invest more energy in community building and deciding things together." She contrasts this to Humanscapes' composition that includes many second-generation Aurovilians who "go home [to their parents] to eat. They don't need to create community." Ole points out that Kriya residents can plant their own vegetable gardens, for which there is abundant recycled waste water.

Ole says the Housing Service is "happy" with the way in which Kriya has manifested. "This was an empty field a few years ago,

and people were so critical when we first put these buildings, saying 'No one will want to live here, and it's horrible and in the sun.' Now you can hardly see the buildings because it's already green. And now a lot of people ask to live here now. We've even had people who went to look at Humanscapes, and said they prefer to stay in Kriya. Here, they water the trees, and can grow vegetables, and have some connection to the place and each other."

Learnings for the future

Can Kriya be seen as a model for building communities for youth? Ole argues in the affirmative, especially in terms of cost and the speed at which it was achieved. Kriya's construction began in January 2017, and the first two phases were completed within one year. Ole compares this with Sacred Groves, an environmentally-friendly low-cost housing project that has been in process for five years, where the prototypes "are still not completed," and where no one is living yet. He also compares Kriya to Humanscapes, which cost four times the amount of Kriya.

So what has been Housing Service's main learning from these projects that aim to build with sustainable technologies? "Small cheap prototypes," says Ole. "Definitely not more than one storey, so if it falls down it's not so dangerous. Things should be tested before making them." He points out that Kriya's building team took feedback from residents living in the prototypes in Maisons des Jeunes and Pony Farm, and the team keeps trying to modify existing designs or try new things.

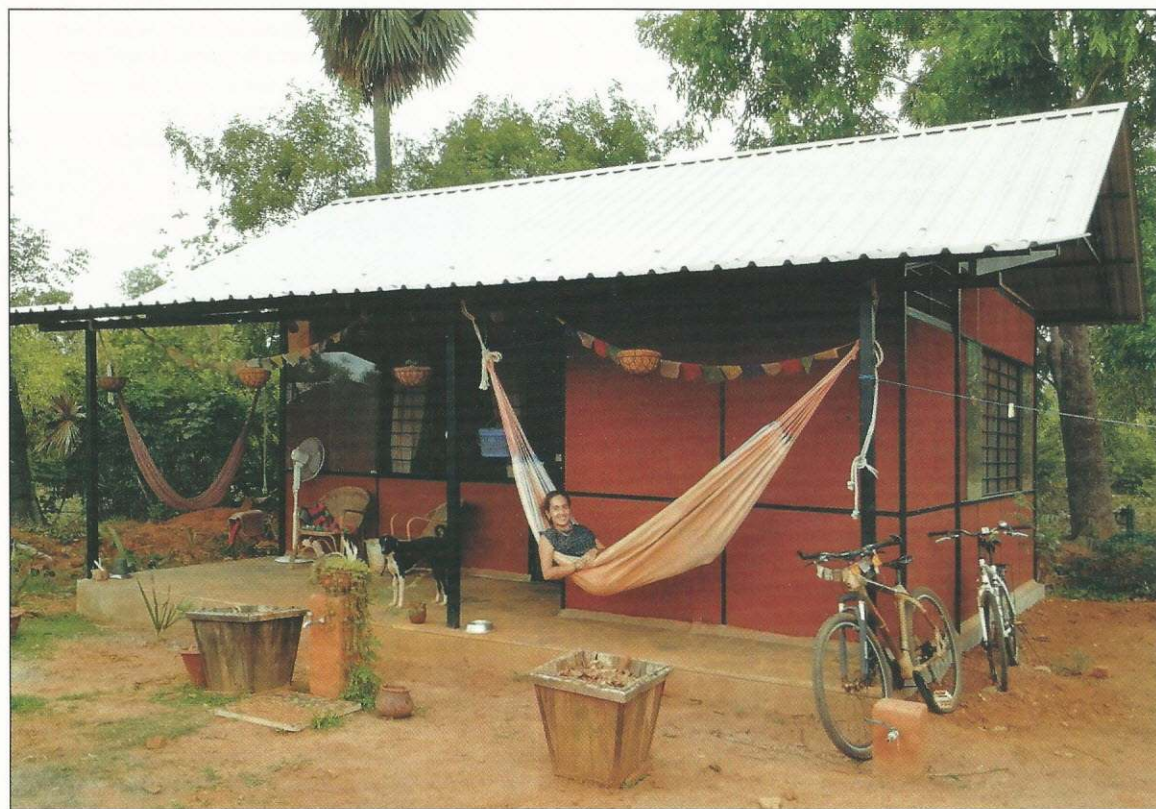
Housing Service plans to build more projects along Kriya lines, with Housing Service as the project holder. They plan to engage youths, architects and builders in a collective design process in order to come up with prototypes. All of this is intended to replace the early keet hut with a more contemporary version - keet being an unviable material these days, due to its high cost and need for regular replacement.

"In all ways, it's fantastic," says Ole, about Kriya's potential as a model. "It's protected the land, created a new community, created the possibility for young people to come and settle in Auroville. The whole project cost about 1.5 crores to accommodate 50 people. This is the most innovative of the low cost housing projects at the moment."

The Anitya team - who are all currently living in Kriya until they can build their homes on Anitya's land - also hope that their approach to community building under the Joy of Impermanence umbrella can become a showcase. Serena points out how it can be hard for new people in Auroville to get access to knowledge, so the Anitya team is documenting everything, so that on open days, "visitors can come through and see what's possible. We will make signs with QR codes so people can scan their phone and learn everything about how that building was made." The team also hope to help other people set up communities, to share their own knowledge and "help with the bureaucratic side".

"Joy of Impermanence is a dream of mine, and it's coming true," says Serena, "and I'm very grateful for that opportunity that Auroville has given us to create that space. As youth newcomers, we want a chance to do what the pioneers did. Let us get our hands dirty. We have energy and some sweat to spare, so let us do something positive. There's so much bureaucratic process now, we're getting stuck. We're putting many hours day and night into this project, not for any maintenances, but because we believe in it, and we want to achieve. We want the chance to help manifest this dream."

Lesley



Serena reclining in her hammock outside her mud couple's unit in Kriya

The FAMC interacts with the community

Auroville's Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) held two general meetings in November in an effort to come closer to the community. A report.

In two meetings on November 9th and 18th, the FAMC updated the community about its work and challenges. But it first apologized for its irregular reporting, such as publishing its summer report only by the end of October. "We haven't had any members in our group who were competent to carry our communication to the community," explained Nicole, one of the FAMC members. "We felt this lack increasingly, both in terms of reporting and live communication. That's why we decided on a series of meetings." She called on the Residents' Assembly Service and other working groups to help the FAMC, to ensure that "something emerges with which we all are comfortable." Inge, another FAMC member, clarified that "general meetings are very important to update on the ongoing topics, but are even more important to share the deeper reasons why things have been done, which cannot so easily be communicated in reports, and give the community opportunity to ask questions."

The FAMC's decision to interact more with the community was widely appreciated. "Lack of community interaction brings you on the slippery slope, leading to mistrust, speculation and mud-slinging. Please invest time and energy in regular communication to the community," said Vikram.

The FAMC then proposed to address a wide array of topics: The selection of the Budget Coordination Committee members; the Pour Tous Purchasing Service in Aspiration; the Guidelines for Activities; the Amendments of the Code of Conduct; the Tax Deduction at Source; the Goods and Services Tax; the need to restructure the system of trusts and units; the Silver Fund; the Internal Audit, and the need for a uniform and centralised accounting system. Any topics that emerged which could not be addressed during the meetings would be put in a 'parking lot' which, FAMC members promised, would not become 'a graveyard' as a skeptical observer suggested, but "will be dealt with in subsequent general meetings." And with that promise, the FAMC presented its first topic.

The Budget Coordination Committee (BCC)

The BCC is a working group constituted by the Residents' Assembly which functions under the overall direction of the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC). Its task is to manage the City Services income, allocate the City Services budgets and monitor the proper utilisation of the budgets. Once a year it submits an annual City Services Budget for the FAMC's approval.

The BCC's functioning, said the FAMC, had left something to be desired. The BCC had not been able to produce regular and timely annual budgets based on good knowledge of ground realities; it did not take timely decisions; there was little or no monitoring of activities; and it was irregular in its reporting to the community, aside from publishing monthly figures. "I have been an FAMC member for two years," said Dhruv. "The first budget submitted by the BCC was delayed for more than six months. In the absence of a budget, the FAMC was forced to approve only an inflationary increase of a flat 4% for each City Service budget. The capacity to drive the financial coordination was missing."

The BCC had been structured as a group selected by and representing Auroville Working Groups. The FAMC decided to change this system and asked Working Groups to only nominate people, from which the FAMC then selected the members. These members will now function as representatives of the community as a whole and no longer

The FAMC's tasks

The accounts of all trusts, units and activities of the Auroville Foundation are consolidated into the account of the Auroville Foundation. The FAMC has as its mission to ensure that financial rules and regulations, both internal and external, are followed; that there is financial transparency, clarity, and accountability; and that all funds and assets of Auroville are being managed in a responsible manner and are used to achieve the vision set out in the Charter of Auroville. It is mandated to encourage the development of an economy based on the Mother's vision, which includes promoting the establishment of a self-supporting city of 50,000 people, promoting a vibrant and sustainable economy, ensuring that everyone contributes in work, kind, and/or money and that the exchange of money between Aurovilians is eliminated.

represent the interest of the working group. Three members were selected for their financial and accounting knowledge.

A few objections to the new structure were raised. Devi objected to the absence of a representation of the bioregion. "There will be no understanding in the BCC or FAMC if the bioregion is not having a spokesperson in the BCC to ensure it gets the support it deserves," she said. Another member complained about the over-representation of members from the financial sector. These questions were put in the parking lot for further consideration.

The Pour Tous Purchasing Service.

Pour Tous has a long history. In brief, the unit was established in 1972 and The Mother gave it the name For All - Pour Tous. Its purpose was to provide basic goods at the best price to Aurovilians without the exchange of money across the counter, and without it becoming a commercial enterprise aimed at making money.

In 1977, Pour Tous moved to its present location near Aspiration community. A decade later, the name was changed to Pour Tous Purchasing Service (PTPS), and, in accordance with its original ideals, was placed under the Service Trust, one of the trusts of the Auroville Foundation. Units under the Service Trust are not intended to make any profit on its dealings with Aurovilians and should provide goods at the best price. For this reason, units under the Service Trust are exempt from paying the 33% profit contribution to City Services.

PTPS, however, developed differently. Under the able management of Kala and Kumar, it was not only able to turn a dilapidated unit into a healthy one and repay its large debts - it managed to make a substantial profit over the last ten years of Rs 2.5 crore. Being a unit of the Service Trust, no contribution to the community was paid.

This change of orientation into a profit-making unit has caused much frustration among some Aurovilians, as PTPS does not honour the vision for which Pour Tous was originally conceived. The Service Trust Trustees object that a profit-oriented retail unit is registered under the Service Trust, and would like it to become a community-oriented service, like its sibling the Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC) next to the Solar Kitchen. The running costs of this centre are paid from a City Services budget, which allows it to offer products at the lowest possible price.

Throughout the years, various FAMCs have tried to convince the PTPS executives that PTPS should revert to being a service unit, but without success. Kala and Kumar want to run PTPS as a commercial income generating unit, open to all. The present FAMC agreed that this could happen, but put three conditions: (1) PTPS would have to pay the City Services contribution owed from 2012 to the present, e.g. 33% of its profits; (2) PTPS would need to contribute compensation for the assets it freely acquired from the community; and (3) PTPS would have to change its name and not include 'Pour Tous' or 'PT' in its new name. The executives, however, do not agree to the second and third condition. The FAMC now proposes that a decision of the Residents' Assembly will decide the issue.

The issue was hotly debated. Kumar explained the stand of the PTPS executives. "We've never thought of PTPS as a service-oriented unit. We thought of it as a commercial unit. We put our soul and heart into this unit, we never received any help from whomever, and we were able to turn it to profit making because of our hard work and our due diligence. We are not a service. We do not want to be run under the pressure of some working group. We want independence. We do not want to be bullied around by anybody, and the money should be used for the collective."

Other Aurovilians argued differently. Anne reminded that "For all-Pour Tous is a mantra" and that there should be a serious reflection on its deeper meaning. Nikidass argued that PTPS should be for all the people, but that with its present pricing policy, it's cheaper for Aurovilians to go to Pondicherry. Joseba, one of the trustees of Service Trust, informed about the outcome of a recent meeting of the Board of Trustees of the Service Trust, which concluded that PTPS should continue as a service and not be transformed into a commercial unit. "Commercial units should work towards the outside; the role of the services is to provide whatever is needed in Auroville for the community. If the executives do not want this, they should vacate," he said.

Another observation was that PTDC is closed to new Aurovilians and Newcomers, as the unit has too little space to serve more people. Those

excluded people have no option but to go shopping at PTPS in Aspiration or at HERS in Kottakarai, which is uncomfortably far for some people. Also Auroville's guests and volunteers are forced to buy outside the city area. The question was raised: did Mother, when She talked about For All - Pour Tous, only mean Aurovilians, or also Newcomers and those who give their services to Auroville for a short period? Kumar recalled that some time ago, 300 people signed a petition to have a PTPS built in the city area, but that this proposal has been blocked by Auroville's Town Planning Department.

The discussion ended with the decision that a separate general meeting on this topic will be called, in which the PTPS will be given full opportunity to present its views. This ended the first General Meeting.

The Activities Guidelines 2019

The second General Meeting focused on how to regulate Auroville's organisational structure. The Auroville Foundation has 37 trusts, under which 303 units, 372 activities and 120 City Service activities operate. The total number of units and activities is 792, and with a population of about 1 550 adult Aurovilians [see article on page 7, eds] this translates into one unit for every two Aurovilians.

It is the FAMC's task to regulate all these trusts, units and activities. To do so, over the years various systems have been developed. In 2014, the Governing Board approved a *Memorandum of Understanding and Guidelines for Trusts and Units*. On this basis, draft *Regulations between Trusts and Units* were elaborated, which later evolved into the *Code of Conduct for all units of the Auroville Foundation* (CoC). The Board approved the CoC in 2017.

But the CoC hardly regulated small scale 'activities'. Over the years, many were established under so-called 'umbrella units' which, in turn, were part of a trust. For example, the Kattidakalai trust has an umbrella unit called 'Auroville Activities' which holds 93 activities [among which is *Auroville Today*, eds]; the umbrella unit 'Auroville Small Scale Activities' holds 70 activities; the 'Exploration' umbrella holds 95 large and small guesthouses; AV Arts Service holds 65 activities in the field of arts; Auroville Food Activities has 25 food related activities and LEAD holds 24 educational activities.

The exponential increase of activities worried the FAMC. Concerned with the significant liabilities that activities can collectively create, and noting that some activities were not properly managed, the FAMC decided to stop the setting up of new activities until new Activity Guidelines are in place.

On August 30th, the FAMC presented a first draft of these Guidelines to executives of umbrella units and activity managers. The meeting wasn't easy and a number of disagreements were voiced. The suggested community contribution was considered too high; the turnover threshold at which an activity should graduate into a unit was questioned; and the proposal that umbrella unit executives, activity managers, and accountants could only hold one position was challenged. After this meeting the FAMC decided to set up a task force of 'stakeholders' to formulate guidelines that reflect the needs of the different types of activities and different sectors.

Margarita, one of the task force members, explained the difficulties. "The FAMC is concerned about increased liabilities and risks to the community as many activity managers are not versed in Indian statutory regulations, financial controls and Auroville internal policies, and only few have a general business sense. The trustees of the trust under which the activity operate are personally responsible for all that is done or not done by the activity. In a case of non-compliance, substantial penalties can be imposed and Auroville's reputation and name may be damaged. It is difficult for any trustee to monitor the large number of activities run under an umbrella unit."

Krishna, another task force member mentioned one of the most interesting conclusions of the task force. "There was a shift in perspective from the earlier draft guidelines to now include shared roles and responsibilities of each of the stakeholders, including trustees, executives, accountants, and managers." Another was that the realisation that new entrepreneurs need to be more centrally guided, for which the Integrated Entrepreneurship Lab was recently setup. [see box on page 1, eds] The Task Force expects to release the new draft Activities Guidelines by the end of this year for community feedback. After incorporating feedback, a final version will be included in the *Code of Conduct* [see below] which will be submitted to the Residents' Assembly for approval.

In the question and answer session on this topic, the FAMC was requested to also study what is to be done with unused, underutilised and abandoned immovable assets, and to look into units that are not registered under the Auroville Foundation but operate from Auroville. These topics were also delegated to the parking lot.

The Code of Conduct

The *Code of Conduct for All Trusts and Units of the Auroville Foundation* was the last topic of the second General Meeting. On behalf of the FAMC, Lyle presented the purpose of the Code and explained why it needs to be amended.

"The purpose of the Code of Conduct is to ensure that there is a collective sharing of resources that are generated within Auroville," said Lyle. "It also ensures participatory governance by empowering working groups selected by the Residents' Assembly, namely the Working Committee and the FAMC, to protect Auroville from units assuming liabilities that could endanger Auroville's financial viability and growth. And it improves financial and asset management such that the proceeds are used for the growth of all sectors of Auroville."

But changes are required. The FAMC wants to improve on the purpose and the general principles of the present code, introduce details for eligibility of trustees and executives, specify their duties and responsibilities, introduce succession planning, and make tighter conditions for what to do in cases where mismanagement is suspected. The proposed amendments also include the mandatory use of a standardised chartered account system and mandatory participation in a centralised account system; stipulations on the use of external bank accounts for fixed deposits; and conditions to ensure that units are maintaining adequate reserves for employees upon termination of contract in accordance with statutory rules, such as the Employees Provident Fund.

The amendments also address contribution guidelines, which are not sufficiently clear, and when exceptions to the mandatory profit contribution can be given. Amended versions of Loan Regulations and a new guideline on Allowable Business Expenses will be introduced. The last topic was highlighted.

"Historically, the community has never expressed its views on allowable business expenditures," said Lyle. "When Dr. Henk Thomas and chartered accountant Manuel Thomas presented their book on the Auroville economy in 2013, they observed that the income disparities in Auroville were on the increase. This has continued ever since. But there is no justification that someone working in an Auroville service unit is not properly maintained, and all units need to contribute as much as they can to bring maintenances on an equal level. Excessive expenses can dramatically reduce profit and contributions to Auroville. Clear guidelines are also required for Chartered Accountants to evaluate valid business expenses versus private expenses."

The process for amending the present CoC will start with the FAMC seeking the views of all trustees and the BCC. The FAMC will also post a draft for community feedback and other groups. The FAMC then plans to hold a general meeting presenting feedback received and provide justifications for including or not including suggestions, and then the decision will be given to the Residents' Assembly whether or not to replace the current CoC with the amended version. Lyle warned that even the amended version of the CoC will not be perfect, and that further amendments can be expected to be made in future.

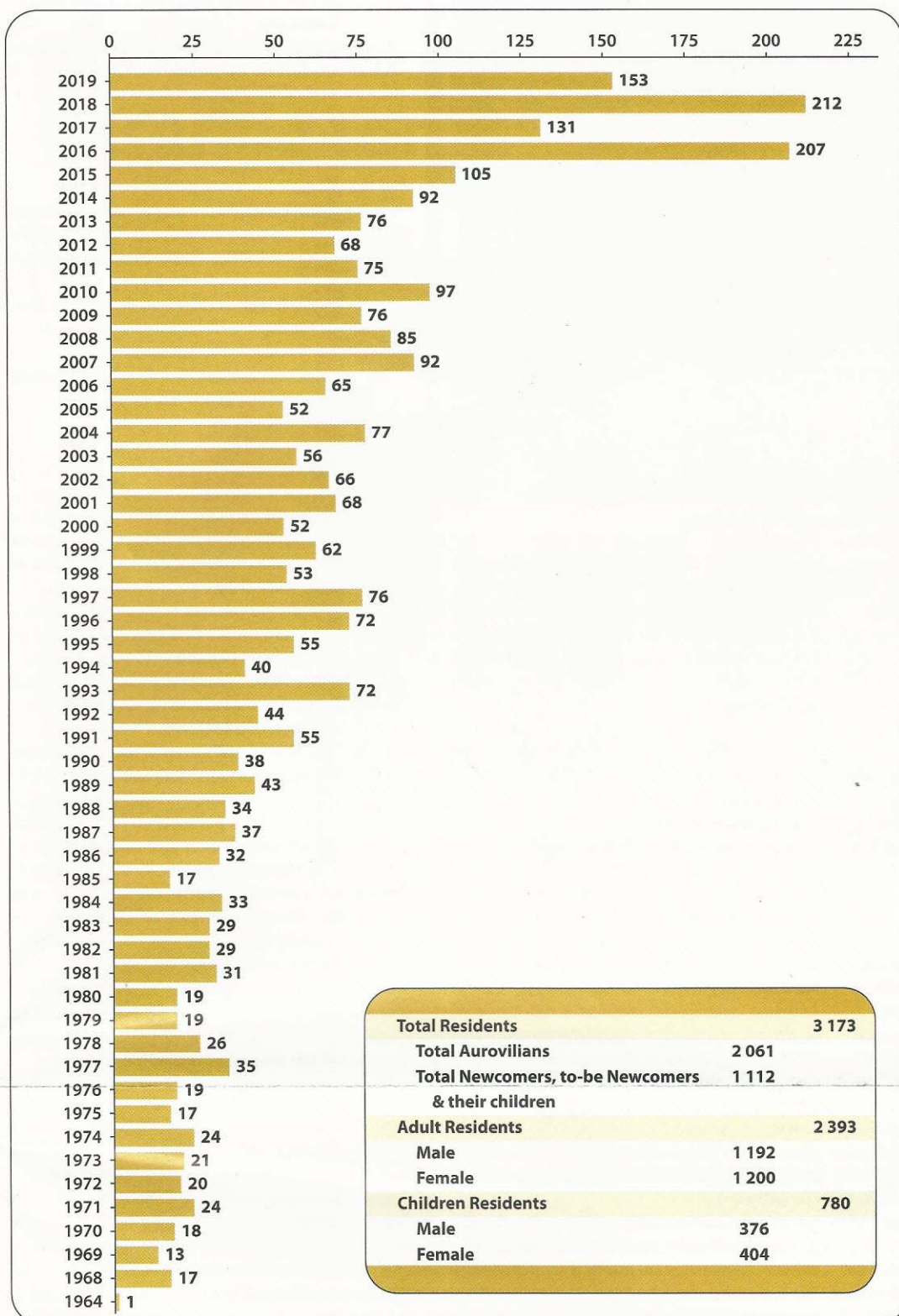
In the question and answer session, criticism was voiced by Bobby, a member of the Auroville Board of Commerce (ABC), that the existing CoC had never been approved by the Residents' Assembly. The FAMC acknowledged this, but pointed out that the forerunners of the CoC, the *Guidelines* and *Draft Regulations*, had also never been approved by the Residents' Assembly. "The question of approval never came up, as the ABC was itself involved in drafting the *Guidelines* and later the *Regulations*, and was mentioned in them," explained Lyle. "But the ABC was excluded from the CoC by the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, as it is not an official working group appointed by the Residents' Assembly." He added that also many dealings of Auroville units lack approval of the Residents' Assembly, such as the use of the money that the units are generating.

But there was also appreciation for this difficult work of the FAMC. "I applaud the efforts of the FAMC," said Swaha. "I came here in 1995 and served on various working groups, including the

continued on page 7

Auroville population on the increase

Arrival's year breakdown



The latest annual population figures have been released by the Residents Service, giving us a window through which to notice some interesting trends and tidbits about the community's make-up, including countries of origin, age and length of stay.

The community's growth continues with an increase of 167 new residents since last year's break through the 3 000 barrier. Our gender divide is almost exactly 50:50; 1 200 women to 1 192 men. 57 nations are represented in Auroville, down one from last year. Whilst it's not a united nations, it's still a very diverse community with India and Europe being the predominant countries of origin.

Notable changes include France growing by 23 people from last year's number of 426. Our Indian population has grown an extraordinary 79 people in one year, from 1 336 to 1 415. Despite their disparate size, the Americans and Dutch are in a dead heat of 105 people each at No 5 in our population chart.

There are noticeable quirks; we have 29 Swedes, but from their Nordic siblings we have only 7 Danes, 2 Norwegians and 2 Finns. From Africa there are 11 South Africans, but only 3 Ethiopians, 2 Rwandese, 1 Algerian and 1 Egyptian. From our direct neighbours there are just a few folk; 3 Sri Lankans, 3 Tibetans, 8 Nepalis. Likewise with South East Asia, just 1 Indonesian and 2 Filipinos. Some smaller nations are very well represented; 55 Koreans, 52 Israelis, 44 Swiss, 45 Belgians and over a hundred folk from the former Soviet Union – Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and Kazakhstan. There are untold stories of TV shows, Aurobindo centres and translated books that must have met a reciprocity in those lands.

I have a – perhaps self-evident – hypothesis about communities; that those who commit their lives to the ideals and vision of the place are the foundations that help that place survive and grow into the long term. The fascinating chart of the year of arrival shows one of Auroville's strong points, that of the longevity and commitment of its early residents. Including the intriguing person from 1964 there are 114 Aurovilians who came here before 1974 and presumably had Mother's Darshan, who are still living here. 18 had come by 1968 and could have been at the inauguration. Their first hand knowledge of the founding of Auroville, Mother's guidance and the sweat and commitment of the early years is still here.

The other noticeable fact is the length of stay; the graph of arrivals who are still here is fairly consistent over all these years. There are 1 125 people who have lived over twenty years here. That is a lot of accumulated knowledge, stability and presence in Auroville. Auroville is evidently a place people come to live, not to try out community for a while. Unlike other communities founded in the 1960s, which flared in numbers and then reduced or even ended in the more conservative 1980s era, there is a consistent intake and growth in Auroville, testifying to Mother's vision still being active in attracting people to this place of evolution. There has been a steady annual population growth until 2016 when the growth rate doubled to an average of 176 newcomers joining per year, which is roughly one new Aurovillian every two days.

In terms of age we range from 0 all the way to 99. The most popular year of birth is 1975. Whilst we now have two needed old age homes, the average age is still just under 40, or if you take out the children, 47 years, so we have not quite reached peak old age time in the way that Japan has. There are 8 people in their 90s here and 53 over 80.

In the hard analysis of statistics, nuances are, of course, lost. The number of dual nationals for instance is not covered. Neither – unlike the German and Indian passports – is the option to be a third sex included in Auroville's statistics. There are increasing amounts of OCIs – those of

Total number of residents including newcomers, pre-newcomers and their children

	2018	2019
1 INDIA	1336	1415
2 FRANCE	426	449
3 GERMANY	257	259
4 ITALY	162	170
5 NETHERLANDS	104	105
6 USA	96	105
7 RUSSIA	72	74
8 UK	66	67
9 SPAIN	55	60
10 SOUTH KOREA	44	55
11 ISRAEL	46	52
12 BELGIUM	41	45
13 SWITZERLAND	45	44
14 SWEDEN	27	29
15 CANADA	25	27
16 UKRAINE	21	22
17 AUSTRALIA	15	19
18 CHINA	14	16
19 JAPAN	13	14
20 AUSTRIA	13	13
21 BRAZIL	11	11
22 SOUTH AFRICA	11	11
23 HUNGARY	9	9
24 ARGENTINA	8	8
25 NEPAL	7	8
26 IRAN	6	7
27 DENMARK	4	7
28 SLOVENIA	6	6
29 MEXICO	5	6
30 BELARUS	4	4
31 COLOMBIA	4	4
32 KAZAKHSTAN	4	4
33 LATVIA	4	4
34 MACEDONIA	4	4
35 ETHIOPIA	3	3
36 SRI LANKA	3	3
37 TIBET	3	3
38 BULGARIA	2	2
39 ECUADOR	2	2
40 FINLAND	2	2
41 IRELAND	2	2
42 LITHUANIA	2	2
43 NORWAY	2	2
44 PHILIPPINES	2	2
45 PORTUGAL	2	2
46 RWANDA	2	2
47 TAIWAN	2	2
48 CHILE	1	2
49 ICELAND	2	1
50 ALGERIA	1	1
51 CZECH REPUBLIC	1	1
52 EGYPT	1	1
53 INDONESIA	1	1
54 LUXEMBOURG	1	1
55 MOLDOVA	1	1
56 POLAND	1	1
57 ROMANIA	1	1
58 SERBIA	1	0
TOTAL RESIDENTS	3 006	3 173

Indian origin born in the diaspora, who return to India. I wonder if in time an Aurovillian status will emerge, reflecting Mother's dream for 'a place that no nation could claim as its sole property'; and from the Charter belonging to 'humanity as a whole' and 'free from moral and social conventions'. Until that time, our population stats are an intriguing indicator of our origins that we left behind to create this dream.

Peter

MATRIMANDIR

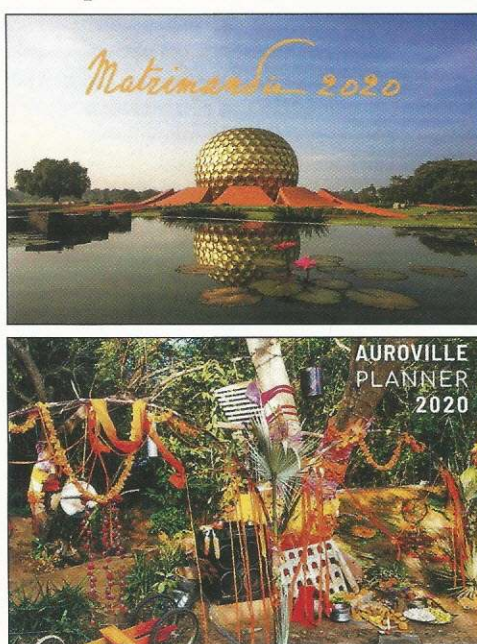
2020 calendar and planner

The 2020 edition of the Matrimandir desk calendar has many new features, is more colourful, and has a gold-embossed cover page. It has quotations from the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, months and days are printed in four languages and Darshan and other important days as well as moon days are indicated. The price is Rs. 170 (excluding postage).

The smaller *Auroville Planner 2020* depicts a variety of daily life in Auroville: The Trashion Show at Kalabhum, a meditative dawn photo in the Amphitheater, activities in the Youth Center, photos from Solitude, the RERS horse tournament in Brihaspati, the lotus pond and celebrations at the Matrimandir, VAST dance/theater performance at Bharat Nivas, and Odd Eye See contemporary theater performance by the Unicorns in the Visitors Center. Below each photo is a short quote by the Mother or Sri Aurobindo. Darshan days, holidays and full/new moon days are indicated. The price is Rs 210 excluding postage.

All sale proceeds of the calendar and planner will be donated to the Matrimandir.

For more information write to Tine, Aurogreen, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India or email tine@auroville.org.in



THE AUROVILLE ECONOMY

continued from page 6

FAMC, and the problem they are trying to address was well entrenched already in those times. They are now trying to do something which was needed to be done for a long time. All the time that we have been trying to address Auroville's finances, we came up against commercial unit executives, not all but a majority, who basically say, 'We can do anything we want and you cannot make us do anything we do not want to do.' This is intended to address that and we should all applaud this, their courage, bravery and commitment to try to manifest the ideals of Auroville."

What next

As these two meetings demonstrated, the consideration of such topics takes time, partly because complex issues underlie them. These issues include the relationship between individual creativity and community responsibility, and between allowing space for individual growth while ensuring that the larger collective is not disadvantaged. Of the four topics addressed in the two meetings, three topics need further discussion. Many others await their time. The FAMC's community interactions promise to be intensified in the month to come.

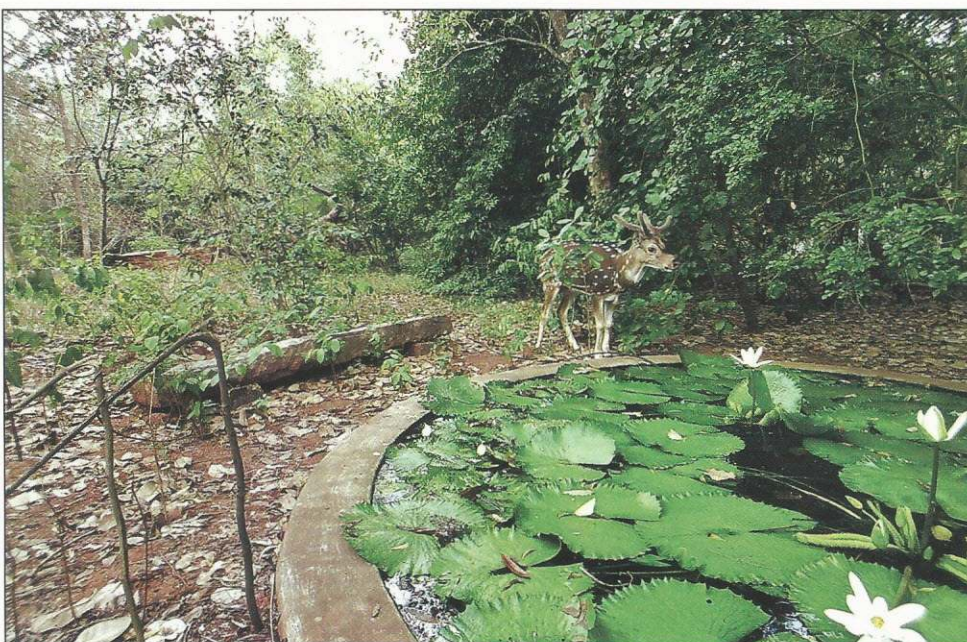
Carel

The Northern Wildlife Corridor

The Northern Wildlife Corridor is a simple yet highly impactful proposal to unite disparate but closely located Auroville forest areas through the creation of a corridor. A relatively small investment in a handful of plots would create large scale benefits.

Rapacious land speculation in the Master Plan area and the population growth of Puducherry is threatening the environmental sustainability of Auroville, which is why innovative and immediate solutions like this are needed to address these threats. We need to create as many forest spaces as possible for the health not just of Auroville but for what it represents: the first turn of the tide from the destruction of nature to living in harmony with her.

For to stand inside an abundant forest next to a ploughed cashew nut tope or denuded land is to see two human futures in one snapshot; one richly diverse and the other dystopian. Two worldviews divided by a thin fence. Will we live on a bountiful earth or a dead moon as Mother so presciently warned in 1958?



A deer in the Greenbelt in Auroville

The proposal is simple; that the existing sanctuaries of fragmented forest areas in the northern greenbelt be joined together to create a north-south corridor. It would link Revelation Sanctuary to Kamataru sanctuary via the Ridge-Top Sanctuary at the heart of the northern forests of Auroville, to create a thin wilderness zone stretching from the city area to our northernmost border. Once linked, these sanctuaries will be a place for nature to be left alone. There will be no human habitation, no cutting of trees, and dead wood will be allowed to decompose to benefit the top soil and the whole forest ecosystem.

While the actual acreage needed to be purchased is only four to five acres, this proposal maximises all the benefits we currently enjoy from forests. Firstly, it gives the bigger mammals more room to breed. At present we have

deer, jackals, monitor lizards, porcupines and civet cats in our forests. Rare eagles, often an indicator species for ecosystem regeneration have been nesting for twenty-five years in the sanctuaries. For an animal, even a thirty foot wide corridor is wide enough for it to journey safely over distances.

"Fauna follows flora" is a well-known saying among foresters. In Auroville this is already evident from the noisy and colourful birdlife which has accompanied and, in turn, assisted reforestation. Birds eat the fruit of indigenous evergreen trees and deposit the seeds in the neighbouring areas so that, season by season, more trees are found outside and inside the existing sanctuaries and forests. In short, creating a greater acreage of forest leads to greater diversity of flora and fauna, and so to greater sustainability.

This proposed project also has some specific benefits for water conservation. Rishi Walker of Kamataru mentions that the Rayapudupakkam watershed starts around Kamataru forest. He points out that the top of the watershed is important for water conservation and that if the top of the watershed is degraded then there will be lots of run-off in high rains: 'The health of the hills is the wealth of the plains'. Rishi suggested in our previous issue that hydration, the water percolation of the soil, should be our prime focus. This corridor would be another step towards achieving that goal.

A large enough contiguous forest of closed evergreen canopy will affect the local microclimate, lowering the temperature in relation to non-forested areas outside. A north to south green wall would also provide a buffer, a pause, a geographic in-breath from the assault of shops, hotels, roads and money that is viscerally, visually and audibly imposing itself upon the eastern part of the Greenbelt. Here different values, the value of nature, would be prioritized.

The Land Board is supportive of this proposal and the idea of nature corridors in general and will do what they can to facilitate the purchase of strategic parcels of land. When these lands are bought, in the first year they would be fenced, banded and planted with trees. In subsequent years, more trees would be planted and the fences maintained. Fencing alone will allow natural regeneration to occur.

Should this green corridor be manifested, two more potential corridors are immediately available for unification, and these would be in addition to the four planned city parks which would stretch from the centre of Auroville all the way to the periphery. One step, one acre, one seed, one nest, one insect at a time and, hopefully, the green fingers of these corridors will eventually link us not only in human unity but also in forested unity.

Peter

"I am telling them that they are in the process of withering and ruining the earth with their idiotic system...With what they have at their disposal they could...oh, transform the earth so quickly! Transform it, put it into contact, truly into contact, with the supramental forces that would make life bountiful and, indeed, constantly renewed – instead of becoming withered, stagnant, shrivelled up: a future moon. A dead moon."

*The Mother, saying she wishes to put a challenge before the 'whole financial world'.
Mother's Agenda, October 4th, 1958*

ORGANISATION

Citizens' Assemblies

Recently, much energy has gone into finding ways to reinvigorate Auroville's organization, and the Residents Assembly in particular. There is a widespread feeling that our present organisation is dysfunctional. This is reflected, among other things, in a lack of vision and excessive bureaucracy. There is also felt to be a widening gap between the residents and the major working groups, leading to accusations that the Residents Assembly is being sidelined regarding certain important decisions.

After a General Meeting in August called in response to concerns about the situation, three task forces formed. One was tasked to propose a new procedure for selecting members of major working groups; another to envision ways of overhauling the larger organisation; and a third to 'revive' the Residents Assembly.

In parallel with these initiatives, another small group has begun independently exploring another way in which residents can be educated about the major issues facing the community as well as empowered to inform decision-making: Citizens' Assemblies.

Citizens' Assemblies are attempts to encourage all citizens to participate in governance. Although the roots of 'participatory and deliberative democracy' can be traced back to ancient Athens, there is renewed interest in the concept today, and experiments have taken place in Canada, the Netherlands, the U.K., Poland, and in India. In Canada and The Netherlands the topic was electoral reform. In Andhra Pradesh the topic was the future of farming in the state. Here a group of small farmers, after hearing from experts, concluded that the state should allow local community control over farming, and rejected the state's preferred option of GM crops and increased mechanisation.

Perhaps the best publicised Citizens' Assemblies to date have taken place in Ireland, where they played an important role in influencing recent referenda on abortion and same sex marriage.

While Citizens' Assemblies can take different forms, the core features remain the same. These are the random selection of participants which try to reflect a cross-section of the population; facilitated

discussion of an important issue after inputs from experts and proponents/opponents of different perspectives; and a final report which may contain recommendations for action.

A Citizens' Assembly, which can number between 20 – 200 participants, dissolves once its task is completed and a new one is randomly selected for a new topic. Citizens' Assemblies are run by a team of coordinators whose impartiality is essential and who have no stake in any particular outcome. They are responsible for overseeing the process of random selection, inviting experts, stakeholders and facilitators, and ensuring the outcomes from the process would be shared with the relevant people for consideration.

Relevance to Auroville

Citizens' Assemblies could address particular challenges which hamper the Auroville community at the moment. For example, our current selection process leaves many people feeling excluded and believing that the process is biased. Random selection prevents these potential or perceived biases as, potentially, everyone in Auroville has the same opportunity to participate and have their voice heard.

Again, very few voices are currently being heard in the collective space, yet we need more people to participate and be engaged if we are to shape an inclusive collective future.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, the process very much aligns with the Auroville value of unending education. Often, when we are called to decide upon important issues, it is difficult to obtain all the necessary information, but at Citizen's Assemblies there is an attempt to present all the data and perspectives on an issue. Participants also learn critical thinking and how to recognise personal biases and biased information. As these skills and capacities spread within the community, they will help build a more conscious and mature collective.

While Citizens' Assemblies have much to offer, they are not seen as a replacement for our present selection process and organisation. Rather, they could be another way of empowering the Residents

Assembly and supporting the work of the working groups.

The small group interested in exploring Citizens' Assemblies has now begun informing the larger community about the concept. Feedback so far has been largely positive, even enthusiastic. At the same time, various points have been raised for consideration. They include how to achieve a representative sample of a complex, multi-cultural community like Auroville, and even if it is wise or necessary; concern about the language – 'Citizens' Assemblies' sounds too similar to 'Residents Assembly' – and concern about the approach. One person observed, after watching a video of the Irish experience, that the approach was overwhelmingly 'mental', mind-based, an approach which may not appeal to or 'reach' some of our population.

Another area that was raised for consideration was the time and energy that may be required from participants. For some assemblies (such as the Irish one) participants came together over several weekends and they were required to undertake considerable reading in between. (In recognition of the work they contributed, they were paid a reasonable stipend – something that would be unlikely to happen in Auroville.) Others forms of assembly (like 'citizens juries') require less input both in terms of attendance and background reading.

Considerable organisation is necessary to make citizens' assemblies a success. This includes, in addition to a team of coordinators, translators and skilled facilitators, people able to present information on what may be a complex topic in a readily accessible way.

All of these are important considerations, which is why the core group is considering running a small pilot next year to try to find some answers. It may well be that Citizens' Assemblies in their current form will need to be adapted to the particular conditions of Auroville. For example, participants could be randomly selected from the Master's List rather than from any specific category. But in the context of current attempts to reinvigorate our collective and include more people in our civic deliberations, Citizens' Assemblies seem to hold promising possibilities.

Alan

About Auroville Today

Auroville Today is an activity of the Kattidakkalai Trust of the Auroville Foundation.
The GST number is: 33AAATA0037BXZV

Subscription information

Subscription rates for 12 issues:

India: Print + digital edition: Rs. 600
Other countries: Print + digital edition: Rs 3,000 equivalent
Other countries digital only edition: Rs 2,100 equivalent.

There are three ways to subscribe:

1. Through our website.

Subscriptions can be ordered and paid on-line through auroville.com and www.auroville.org/avtoday. On-line subscriptions have additional unit charges and bank costs.

2. By bank transfer or cheque.

Bank transfer to account # 163101000118 of Auroville Maintenance at ICICI Bank, Auroville Branch, IFSC Code ICIC0001631, Swift Code ICICINBBCTS reference Contribution Auroville Today. Cheques to be sent to Auroville Today payable to Auroville Maintenance, reference: Contribution Auroville Today.

3. By sending your contribution to:

U.K.: Auroville International U.K., c/o John Mulrey, 7 Cubb Field, Aylesbury, Bucks, HP19 7SJ tel. (44) (0)1296 415685 email: john@aviuk.org

Germany: Auroville International Deutschland e.V., Solmsstrasse 6, 10961 Berlin, tel. (49) (0)30-42803150, Fax (49) (0)30-92091376, email: info@auroville.de. GLS Gemeinschaftsbank, BIC: GENODEM1GLS, IBAN: DE 1643 0609 6780 1938 9200.

USA: Make checks payable to Auroville International USA, and send to:

AVI USA, P.O. Box 188158, Sacramento, CA 95818, Tel: (831) 425-5620* email: info@aviusa.org * or to: Pondicherry, 12 Tinker St, Woodstock NY 12498, tel: 845-679-2926, email: info@pondi.biz

The Netherlands and Belgium:

Auroville International Nederland, Voorhaven 13, 1135 BL, Edam. Email: secretaris@auroville.nu Tel. 0031 6 13053213. Triodos Bank nr 1984.20.927, IBAN NL26TRIO 0198 4209 27, BIC: TRIONL2U

Editorial team:

Alan, Carel, Hilary, Valentina, Lesley. Proofreading: Alan, Lesley. DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu. Contact: Auroville Today, Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. Phone: +91.413.2622572. Email: avtoday@auroville.org.in

Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.